Pioneer volunteer from 1971 celebrates UNV at 50

The year the United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme was established, John Newby became the first UN Volunteer to serve in Chad. Hailing from the United Kingdom and Switzerland, John is now 72 years old. He still recalls how he joined the National Parks Directorate in Chad as a Wildlife Biologist from 1971-1974. As we celebrate UNV’s 50th anniversary, he shares his reflection on his lifetime of experiences.

Fresh out of university, I was intrigued by a poster advertising for UN Volunteer assignments. I applied and was soon deployed to the National Parks Directorate in Chad from 1971-1974.

My UN Volunteer experience benefited me enormously, both personally and professionally. First and foremost, I met my Chadian wife, with whom I have four wonderful children, all born in Chad.

Professionally, my experience in Chad was much like the Big Bang – the beginning of everything. Had I not been a volunteer wildlife biologist I would not be where I am today. That first experience allowed me to learn and to develop a profound knowledge and understanding of conservation in west and central Africa.
This led to a senior career with some of the most significant wildlife conservation organizations. It also led me to create the Sahara Conservation Fund, an organization uniquely focused on the wildlife of Chad and other neighboring countries. Today, this organization works in the very reserve I was posted to all those years ago. In my own little way, I’m giving back to Chad what Chad gave to me.

“As a UN Volunteer, I studied the scimitar-horned oryx before this species became extinct in the wild. In 2016, I was instrumental in bringing it back to Chad, where it now thrives once again. A true success story and one that would not have happened without UNV!

During my volunteer years there were so many memorable occasions – both good and bad. The bad includes my first bout of malaria while tracking leopards. I had to stop and sleep in the bush as best I could, but sleep was difficult with the constant barking of the nearby big cats.

One of the best memories must be my traditional marriage to my Chadian wife. Being led through the village on a pure white horse surrounded by dozens of brightly-clad, ululating girls will never be forgotten. Neither would my first camel trek. Twenty-eight days in the desert. It was really tough, to begin with, but as they say, what doesn’t kill you only makes you stronger. It gave me my first real taste of the desert and its people in all their glory.

And my proudest achievement? There are so many! The relationships I developed as a young volunteer are still very much with me some 50 years later. They have stood the test of time because they were genuine, sincere, and full of mutual understanding and respect.
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